NOTE: The President spoke at 9:10 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Sonia Evans, who introduced the President, and her sons, Jonathan and Jesse.

Interview With Radio Free Asia
June 24, 1998

Q. Mr. President, thank you very much for taking the time to do this with us. We know you have a busy schedule, and we appreciate the gesture.

Human Rights

Q. The first question: Dissidents in China recently issued many open letters hoping to meet you during your stay in China. Why you cannot meet them and what message do you want to send them now?

The President. Well first of all, I have determined to try to meet with as many different kinds of people as I can when I'm in China, but I also want to make decisions based on what I think will maximize the impact of my trip for all the objectives, which include the advancement of human and political rights. One of the things we have pushed very hard for is the adherence of the Chinese Government to the U.N. Convention on Civil and Political Rights, which President Jiang has said he will sign in the fall, in September or October which, as you know, will among other things require China to begin to admit on a regular basis international observers to talk to citizens, including political dissidents, on a regular basis to try to make sure that they are not abused in the practice of their civil and political rights and that they begin to be integrated into the mainstream of society.

I want this trip to advance that cause. And I will structure my meetings and also the meetings of all my staff people appropriately. But I am glad to see so many of these dissidents speaking out and feeling free to speak out. It's obvious that they have concluded, some of them probably at some risk to themselves, to do this. I do believe, as I told President Jiang when he was here, that free political speech and expression is plainly a precondition for any modern state. And over the long run, it is essential to the strength of a country. I mean, we live in an information age where people's ideas basically grow the economy.

So I think that this is a long-term battle that we're all involved in, and I believe we're on the right side of it. And I think in the end, the Chinese will agree.

Q. But Mr. President, the dissidents say that it is disheartening for them that you are not taking this opportunity to make a statement by attempting to meet with them or the families of the Tiananmen students who fell.

The President. Well, I will make a lot of statements. I worked very hard to get a lot of the dissidents out of prison, and I will continue to work very hard on that. And I will do whatever I think will increase my impact. And I won't do anything that I think will actually undermine my ability to get real results. But keep in mind, we also have some other very important objectives right now. Not objectives we will sacrifice for—our human rights agenda to—but objectives that we will pursue in addition to that.

We have very important nonproliferation concerns which have been given new urgency because of the nuclear tests in India and Pakistan. We have very important concerns about trying to stabilize the economic situation in Asia, which if it got out of hand could have an enormous destructive impact on hundreds of millions of people in China, and a number of other issues that we're working on.

So, I will do my best to pursue all of our legitimate concerns and never to minimize the human rights issues, but I have to structure the way I spend my time on this trip in a way that I think is most likely to further the interests of the United States as well as the values we have that we want to—and the things we're trying to do for Chinese people.

Tiananmen Square

Q. Mr. President, when you are being welcomed in the Great Hall of the People adjacent to Tiananmen Square, will the image of the one lonely man standing in front of a tank trying to prevent it from mowing down students in Tiananmen Square flash through your mind

even for a second and cause a twinge because you have accepted the invitation to be welcomed?

The President. Well, first of all, I've thought about that one man a lot. I think that's one of the—obviously one of the most vivid pictures of the last 20 years that anyone has seen. But I think it's important for me, if I'm going to go to China, to not expect that just because I'm the American President I should be greeted in any fashion different from any other world leader that would be greeted there.

And even I noticed that many people, including the Dalai Lama and Wang Dan and others have said, "You know, you should go. You should be received in the way that the Chinese have always received world leaders. That's been the center of their Government for hundreds of years now. And you should speak your mind about human rights, religious rights, political rights." I think that's the right thing to do. I don't think we should confuse ceremony with substance here.

I think that for me to say—when I invite someone to the United States, our welcoming ceremonies, unless there is some physical reason to move it, for example, the back lawn is covered, it's always at the back lawn of the White House unless it's bad weather or unless the whole lawn is covered with something else.

I couldn't very well invite someone to the United States and say, "Well, I would like for you to come see me on a state visit, but I won't let you come to the back lawn of the White House." And I think that it's important to distinguish here between hundreds of years of history that has occurred at that spot and within those walls, of which what happened at Tiananmen Square is definitely a part, but it's not the only thing that's ever occurred there. And I think that it would be wrong for me to expect the Chinese Government to change the way they welcome all world leaders.

On the other hand, it would be equally wrong for me to go there and take no notice of the continuing difficulties with human and political rights. So I expect to honor the ceremony, and I expect to advance what I believe in there and what America represents.

China's Refusal of Radio Free Asia Visas

Q. The Chinese Government has officially denied the visa of three of us. If the administration cannot negotiate successfully over such an issue, how do people expect that your Government come up successfully with the other complex issues as the human rights issue?

The President. Well, for one thing, visas are normally not negotiable by anybody. We don't negotiate with anyone else over who gets a visa to the United States. Our problem is that you were denied visas, we believe, for the wrong reasons.

I supported the establishment of Radio Free Asia. It exists because—in no small measure because it was a significant issue in the Presidential campaign of 1992. I talked about it repeatedly, and I've done my best to expand the operations of Radio Free Asia. The very purpose of Radio Free Asia was to beam honest, open debate into Asia so that, as you know, just as we do these interviews, you know, you ask me whatever questions you wish to ask and you press me on matters that you wish to press.

And I think they made a big mistake. It was especially troubling to me that they denied the visas and thereby denied themselves getting any credit for having given visas to people that they traditionally have not given visas to. They were quite broad.

The Chinese Government has always taken particular offense with my support of creating Radio Free Asia because they believe that we did it for the purpose of undermining the Government of China. The truth is we did it for the purpose of advancing freedom of the press and freedom of debate and freedom of speech throughout Asia. And all governments that do not recognize these things should feel that, in effect, we are opposed to them, not because of particular policies—apart from the idea that we think everybody ought to have free access to ideas. So, I think they made a mistake.

But keep in mind, I wouldn't—that's not the same thing as negotiating over nonproliferation or economic issues or anything else because every nation reserves to itself the complete and unilateral right to decide its visa policies.

Q. I have a followup question. Our feed has been heavily jammed by the Chinese Government. Are you going to raise this issue when you are meeting with the Chinese leaders?

The President. Yes. Yes, I am. You know if you look at—there are now 400,000 Chinese who have access to the Internet, but we estimate there will be 20 million in the next couple of years. If you look at what happened in Europe, in Communist Europe, and how it was basically

flooded with tapes and CD's, as well as with Radio Free Europe, there is no way—and if you look at the fact that as China's economy becomes more internationalized—there will be more and more ideas coming to China.

If you consider the fact that 2½ million Chinese traveled abroad last year, and many of them were not part of any government—if you will, censored government operation, it is a losing battle to try to keep ideas that are contrary to official dogma out of the public debate. It is, in the end, not in the interest of China.

China will be—you see I believe the Chinese Government missed a great opportunity, and I don't have the same attitude some people do. I don't think they did act in their long-term self interest; I think they missed a great opportunity; I think by giving you a visa and letting you come in and talk to people and emphasize the continuing human rights concerns, I think they would be showing strength because they would be showing the capacity to change. And I believe that that, in the end, is the ultimate test of any system of government. You have to have the capacity to change, to respond to legitimate human aspirations. You don't have to give up the society's dominant values or cultures.

There are many things within the whole history of Confucian thought and culture in China from which all societies could learn many positive things. But we know from just studying the landscape of the last 50 years in the world that oppressive government in the end will be resisted by people and in the end is inconsistent with developing a free economy. You can't say, "We're going to have a free economy, but we're going to try to keep controls on what people know, what they hear, what they can say."

And so I think—from my point—I had a slightly different reaction than you did, I know you're bitterly disappointed and angry, and I think you should be. But my view is that they would have shown strength and judgment by giving you the visa and letting you come in and talk to people who would criticize them. I don't think America is weakened because every day someone takes the floor of Congress and criticizes me; every day someone writes an editorial and criticizes me; every day there are—I just don't believe that. I think that—and of course all liberty, any freedom—let me say this—any freedom granted across the board is bound to be abused from time to time. It is in the nature of liberty that it is subject to abuse which is why the framers of the Constitution talked about how important it was for us to build responsibility internally into the character of our citizens.

But in the end, we're stronger when we debate and differ, and we're more likely to get the truth than if we control access to information. So that will be a big—yes, I will ask them to stop jamming Radio Free Asia.

Q. Thank you.

Tibet and the Dalai Lama

Q. Mr. President, another issue which has sort of been a losing issue is the issue of Tibet and the Chinese Government meeting with the Dalai Lama and negotiating greater autonomy with the Dalai Lama. The U.S. Government has in the past put pressure on the Chinese Government to do that. They have so far not done that. You have assured the people in this country and in Tibet that you are taking a message to the Chinese. What is new about this message? What in this message is going to make the Chinese listen and actually sit down at the table with the Dalai Lama?

The President. Well, I think it is—first of all, let me say at this particular moment I don't feel free to say everything I'm going to say to President Jiang because of some of the sensitive work I've been doing on this issue for the last several weeks. But again I would say my general point is, not just to President Jiang but to the other influential members of the Chinese Government: Forget about our difference over what's right and wrong; we think it's wrong to deny the Dalai Lama access to his people in Tibet; we think it's wrong for the people of Tibet to be subject to any sort of religious, cultural, or economic discrimination.

We have not advocated independence for Tibet, separation, civil war, anything disruptive. We have advocated, if you will, autonomy with integrity. It's supposed to be an autonomous region anyway. It is our understanding that that is the position that the Dalai Lama has taken. So my argument to them, the larger message will be, let's lay to the side for the moment the fact that I believe what is happening is wrong, and they don't. I do not believe it is in China's interest.

China has been very—was adroit in trying to find a balance between taking back Hong Kong without destroying what was special about

Hong Kong. Now, I know Hong Kong is an economic engine, but a country is made great by more than its economic engines. And the Tibetan Buddhism as a religious faith, as a culture and a way of life, the ability of the Tibetan people to be free of any kind of economic or other handicaps and the signal it would send to the rest of the world about China's attitude about human dignity and diversity and difference of religion, race, and opinion—the gains to China from doing this would far outweigh any marginal extra tension they might feel about the long-term future of Tibet in this context.

So my argument is going to be, you know, from the point of view of the pure self-interest of the Chinese Government: This is an easy issue; this is not a difficult issue; doing the right thing here is plainly in the interests of China. That's the argument I'm going to make.

Q. But they don't see it that way, Mr. President. This argument has been made in the past. They obviously don't——

The President. They don't see it that way because they continue to believe that the only—that it's just one step to losing part of China. I think it's important for Americans to understand that—this is something that I've learned not just in dealing with China but in dealing with all other countries. Countries are like people; they have a collective memory. And in order to deal with nations effectively when you have differences with them, it's important to understand what their worst nightmare is. Because if we're dominated by our nightmares, we make decisions that are not rational in the eyes of other people.

For example, when dealing with Russia in trying to expand NATO, we had to remember that the Russians were invaded by Hitler and by Napoleon. And that even though no one is now alive who was alive when Napoleon invaded Russia, it is something that is deeply embedded in the psyche, in the consciousness of the Russian people. So that if territorial changes are made along the border of Russia, you have to be sensitive to that and work it out.

China is—the Government of China, the leaders of China, their worst nightmare is disintegration, you know, because they have these memories of when China was weakened and vulnerable to foreign attack, vulnerable to government by warlords, vulnerable to the opium trade, vulnerable to everything because of the disintegration of the central authority. Therefore, to an outsider who knows nothing of China's history, the importance to China, which is so large and so big, of the "one China" policy vis-a-vis Taiwan, of getting back Hong Kong, of making sure that nothing could ever happen and Tibet—to promote any separatism. To us, we see only the downsides of those things. To them, a lot of the things they do which to us are unacceptable, they do, I believe, because they're too much in the grip of the historic memory of disintegration.

And one of the things I have to do is to not lose my patience or my determination, to work until I help to create for them a new and different historic reality so that they feel more confident in doing what I believe is the morally right thing to do, as well as what is in their own self-interest.

But I think it's important to recognize that—you can't assume that—none of these people would be in positions of influence in the largest country in the world if they were without intellectual ability, without sensitivity, without the capacity to be effective. So when they do things that the rest of us think are completely irrational, we have to try to understand what it is that makes them do that.

I just think they could get more goodwill in the rest of the world, for less effort, by doing the right thing on Tibet than nearly any other issue. And I think that getting them to the point where they will see it that way depends upon their having a clear understanding of what a resumed dialog with the Dalai Lama would lead to, not just in a year or 2 years but in 10 or 20 or 30 years.

And I'm not sure the United States has ever had the kind of systematic effort on this that I have been expending for the last few years and that I will continue to expend as long as I am in office with the fond hope of being successful. I intend to continue to work on this very, very hard.

It's obvious that we have no power to compel them to do this. There is no tool, no incentive, no anything because nothing is as important to the Chinese as the territorial integrity of their country—nothing—because of their history. So I have to find a way to argue my case and prevail, and I will keep doing this. I care very, very much about this, and I have been working on this hard for the last couple of years, and I will continue to do it as long as I'm President.

Q. How high is it on the agenda for this trip?

The President. Well, for me it's a big thing. It's a big thing because I think countries—I think all countries—I think the United States has done this, too. None of us are—you know, we all make our mistakes, and we all have our memories, but I think when a great country, because of an inaccurate reading of the facts of a situation or being in the grip of a historical nightmare, makes an error, the consequences can be quite severe.

For example, it took us 2 years and a few months to get the American public to the point, and our allies to the point, that we could go in and end the Bosnian war. Now, a lot of people looking from the outside in said, "Look at this terrible situation in Bosnia. Why don't they just go and do something about it? Why are they taking 2 years?"

Well, the people who say that didn't live through the experience that our military and our people did in Vietnam. Bosnia was not Vietnam for a lot of different reasons. An outsider could say to all of us, "America, why don't you understand this is not Vietnam?" But it took us a while to work through, as a people, and with our allies, why it wasn't, what it was, and what we had to do, what our clear moral responsibility was, what was in our national interest. We did the right thing. And in the lifetime of a country, 2 years is not very long to take to do that but it took—it was a lot of hard work.

And you would be amazed in the debates and the discussions, if you just go back and read things that were in the public in the beginning there were a lot of people who were afraid, "Oh, this is Vietnam all over again."

So I am—I've developed some patience in working on this. I'm impatient to get the results, but I understand what it's like to try to change the mindset of a nation, the psychology of a nation, when it has deeply embedded historical experiences that become a part of the way the leaders of a nation look at everything that happens thereafter.

Korean Peninsula

Q. So, from Tibet to the Korean Peninsula, what do you expect to accomplish from this trip over the Korean issue? Are you going to appoint a special envoy to the Korean—North Korea?

The President. Well, right now I think the—what I would like to do is two things. First of all, I want to get a reaffirmation of the partnership we have with China in the four-party talks. I want to send a clear signal to North Korea and to South Korea that we're prepared to do our part, but I also want us to clearly support the bilateral efforts that are now going on. Since President Kim Dae-jung was inaugurated in South Korea, I have been quite encouraged at the attitude he has taken toward, you know, reaching out directly to the North.

It appears to me, based on the work we did to end—the work that we did with China together to end North Korea's dangerous nuclear program, which had a lot of involvement from Japan and Russia and other countries all supported us. It appears to me that there are some of these matters that divide the North from the South that will have to be resolved directly between the two Koreas. And then there are other things that they will actually need the framework of the four-party talks to work through and the active involvement of China and the United States.

We will be talking about that. But again, this whole matter has acquired greater urgency because of the nuclear tests on the Indian subcontinent. You know, we have to keep the commitment of North Korea in place not to have a nuclear program, particularly since they have such facility in building missiles. It's a very, very big issue.

And I think this is one issue that the pace of the resolution of this depends a lot on the calculations of the people in North Korea and South Korea. We actually could move rather quickly on this, or they could drag it out the way they have been. But for the United States and China, what we have to do is to keep the lid on it, if you will, and keep it moving in the right direction. And I think we're committed to do that. I think we will be successful there.

Q. What about the special envoy? Are you considering a special envoy?

The President. Not at this time because of the level of direct involvement between the North and the South and because right now it wouldn't be consistent at this moment, at least with the nature of the four-party relationship, where it's a partnership with the United States and China working with the Koreas. If there came a time when I thought it was the right thing to do, I would obviously discuss it with

the Chinese and with the South Koreans and decide.

Goals of the Visit to China

Q. Mr. President, I know we are running out of time here so what—critics of this trip you're going to make to China in a short while have said that this is going to be more about symbolism than about substance—what exactly substantially do you hope to achieve on this trip, and are you planning to make some strong speeches on the issue of human rights and freedoms when you are in China, including at the welcoming ceremony at Tiananmen?

The President. Well it's interesting, a lot of the critics who say that then turn around when you ask them what they want me to do, what they want me to do is to make it even more symbolic and give up any substance.

So all my critics who say this is about more symbolism than substance when you ask them what they want me to do they want me to make it even more symbolic and give up the substance.

I believe we will make some progress in a number of areas. I think we'll make some progress in nonproliferation. I think we'll make some progress in dealing with the Asian financial challenges; I hope we will. It's a very big issue that could directly affect the lives of Americans. I think we'll make some progress in dealing with energy and environment issues which are very, very important. You know the pollution in China has now made respiratory problems the number one health problem of children there. And it's a huge issue.

I think we'll make some progress in our scientific cooperation, which has already yielded some significant benefits. And I hope, whether it's obvious or not at the end of the trip, that we will advance the human rights dialog. In a structural way, let me say I think it's important that we advance the rule of law cooperation that we have developed—we have begun with the Chinese. And let me explain why.

If you can get a country like China to change its legal system, even if the leading edge issue is commercial, it's in the system of law that protecting commercial rights and protecting rights of free speech and citizenship tend to merge. And one of the things that I would like to see over the long run is that I would like to see us move to the next step where China moves from reassessing its position on this or that or the other political dissident from time-to-time and releases them, to the point where we have a systematic change in the way people are treated. I think that should be our long-term goal.

Those things won't make as many headlines, but they will change more lives. So I would expect there to be some advances in this whole rule of law cooperation we've been doing. And if we show progress in all these areas, I think the trip will be very much worthwhile. What I'm trying to do is to have—I don't mean to say—I think symbols are important, actually, but I think it's important that in the end what matters is results. Are lives changed for the better? Is the direction of the country better over the long run?

This is a difficult trip because of the differences between us, but it's also an important trip because of our common interests and because so much is at stake. It seems to me that the chances of doing good for the American people and for the stability of the world far outweigh the dealing with the difficulties presented by the trip.

I've seen the Chinese work with us, for example, with great reliability—I could just mention a few things—on the non-proliferation treaty, the comprehensive test ban, the chemical weapons treaty, the observing most of the Missile Technology Control Regime's requirements, stopping cooperation with Pakistan and Iran on a lot of their nuclear programs, other programs. It's not—they've been very good allies in many of these areas.

They gave great leadership to our meeting the other day on the Permanent Five statement on the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests. And I think if you look at the areas where we've made progress, they make the argument for a continued, disciplined engagement where we try to advance our interests, but we never pretend that our interests are only security issues or our issues are only economic issues where we merge our human rights and our political concerns with these other matters. And we just pursue the whole agenda, and we do the best we can. I think it will produce more results than any available alternative.

Q. A strong speech at Tiananmen? A strong speech at Peking University?

The President. There is no speech at——

Q. Oh, there is no speech at Tiananmen?

The President. At the arrival ceremony, which is—well, you know where it is, right off Tiananmen Square. There is no speech, it is just—you know, and by the way, the United States is the only country that I'm aware of where we have little remarks at the arrival ceremony.

Every country I go to, it is the same thing. I get out; you go through the ritual; and then you go in and begin your meetings. But I will say what I have to say in other forums.

Q. Thank you very much, Mr. President. We appreciate your time.

The President. I enjoyed it.

Q. And we hope you will wear this hat.

The President. I love this hat. It's quite pretty.

Q. Hey, you look good in it.

The President. Thank you very, very much.

NOTE: The interview was taped at approximately 10:20 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House for later broadcast, and the transcript was embargoed for release until 3 p.m. In his remarks, the President referred to President Jiang Zemin of China; and freed Chinese dissident Wang Dan. The journalists who conducted the interview were Arin Basu, Feng Xiao Ming, and Patricia Hindman. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Statement Announcing the Benchmarking Process in Federal Procurement
June 24, 1998

Today I am pleased to announce policies that continue my commitment to expand economic opportunity for all Americans. These new guidelines for Federal procurement are designed to remedy discrimination in a carefully targeted way. These reforms, which continue my promise to mend, not end affirmative action, expand opportunities for small disadvantaged businesses.

These new guidelines allow small disadvantaged businesses to receive a price credit of up to 10 percent in bidding for Federal contracts. The credits will be available only in industries that show the ongoing effects of discrimination. The Department of Commerce identified these industries through a process called benchmarking, which compares the actual share of Federal procurement by small disadvantaged firms to the share that would be expected in the absence of discrimination. Limiting credits to these industries satisfies constitutional requirements while targeting our efforts in areas where disparities still exist.

This program is based on authority given the administration by Congress in 1994. These credits will help level the playing field for firms that have suffered from discrimination. However, they do not ensure that any firm will win a contract. Small disadvantaged businesses must compete with all other businesses to win Federal contracts.

The steps we are taking today comply with legal requirements and preserve competition, while serving to remedy discrimination.

Letter to Congressional Leaders on Proposed Hate Crimes Prevention Legislation
June 24, 1998

Dear _____:

I am writing to urge the Senate (House) to act quickly this year to pass the Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 1998. This crucial legislation would expand the ability of the Justice Department to prosecute hate crimes by removing needless jurisdictional requirements for existing crimes and by giving Federal prosecutors the power to prosecute hate crimes committed because of the victim's sexual orientation, gender, or disability.